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SUBJECT: BALANCED AUSTRALIAN REACTION TO MAMDOUH HABIB MEDIA APPEARANCE

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED.

1. (SBU) Summary: Australian former detainee Mamdouh Habib's first media appearance since his release from Guantanamo received predictably wide coverage here, but overall the reporting has balanced his accusations of torture with questions about why he refuses to account for his pre-9/11 activities in Afghanistan. End summary.

2. (U) In his first interview since his recent release, former Australian Guantanamo detainee Mamdouh Habib appeared on Australia's "60-Minutes" program on February 13. During the interview, for which Habib was paid (reportedly A\$200,000), he provided his version of the circumstances of his capture in Pakistan, alleged rendition to Egypt, and some three years of detention at Guantanamo. Habib, however, refused to answer questions about the purpose for his travel to or his activities while in Afghanistan. Most media coverage has been limited to a recounting of Habib's tale. Editorial criticism, where expressed, has been primarily directed at the Australian Government.

3. (U) Habib's "60 Minutes" interview garnered front-page coverage in the national dailies "The Age," "The Australian," and "The Sydney Morning Herald." The liberal The Age (cir. 198,500) ran a teaser entitled "Habib silent of what he did before 9/11," along with an inside article titled "Habib ready to sue, answers reserved for court." The conservative The Australian's (cir. 131,000) headline read, "Torture claims rebut advice to wife," and contrasted the Australian Government's reassurances to Habib's wife of humane treatment for her husband with his tale of mistreatment and torture. Appearing above a full-color photo of an emotional Habib among family members, the story in the left-leaning Sydney Morning Herald (cir. 216,857) was headlined, "I'm no terrorist, but I won't say why I was there." "The Sydney Morning Herald" also ran Raymond Bonner's February 13 "New York Times" article.

3. (U) During a February 14 television interview, Australian Attorney-General Phillip Ruddock rebutted Habib's 60 Minutes appearance, saying, "It provided...very little new information that hasn't already been outlined by his legal advisors and been referred to the United States." Responding to Habib's charge that an Australian official was present during his alleged torture, Ruddock reiterated, "The information that suggests there was an Australian official from the Department of Foreign Affairs present when he was tortured in Pakistan -- or claims to be tortured in Pakistan -- is, on the advice I have received, untrue...We treat allegations of torture very seriously."

SCHIEFFER